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LEGENDS OF THE SLAVEY INDIANS OF THE MACKENZIE RIVER.¹

I. THE LONG WINTER.

BEFORE the present state of the world was established, and when there were as yet no men, a very long winter set in. The sun was never seen, the air was dark, and thick clouds always covered the sky and hung low down. It snowed continually. After this had lasted three years, all the animals were suffering very much from want of food and still more from want of heat. They became greatly alarmed. A grand council was held, which beasts, birds, and fishes attended. It was noticed that no bears had been seen for three years, and that they were the only creatures which did not go to the council.

The meeting decided that the great thing was to find out what had become of the heat, whose long absence was the cause of all their sufferings, and if possible to bring it back again. In order to do this they resolved that as many of them as possible, representing all classes, should go on a search expedition to the upper world where they thought the heat was detained. When the council broke up they all set out, and after much travelling far and wide through the air, some of them were fortunate enough to find the door or opening to the upper regions, and they went in. Among those which were fortunate enough to get in were the lynx, the fox, the wolf, the carcajou, the mouse, the pike, and the mari (dogfish or fresh-water ling). After exploring for some time they saw a lake and beside it a camp with a fire burning. On going to the camp they found two young bears living there. They asked the cubs where their mother was, and were told she was off hunting. In the tipi a number of full, round bags were hanging up. The visitors pointed to the first one and asked the young bears, —

“What is in this bag?”

“That,” said they, “is where our mother keeps the rain.”

“And what is in this one,” pointing to the second bag.

“That,” they answered, “is the wind.”

“And this one?”

“That is where mother keeps the fog.”

“And what may be in this next one?”

“Oh, we cannot let you know that,” said the cubs, “for our mother told us it was a great secret, and if we tell, she will be very angry and will cuff our heads when she returns.”

¹ Read at the Twelfth Annual Meeting of the American Folk-Lore Society at Baltimore, Md., December 28, 1900.

"Oh, don't be afraid," said the fox, "she will never know that you told us."

Then the cubs answered, "That is the bag where she keeps the heat."

The visitors had ascertained what they wanted, and they all went out of the tipi to hold a consultation. It was decided to retire to a distance, as the old bear might return at any time. But first they advised the young bears to keep a lookout for any deer (caribou) which might come to the opposite shore of the lake.

It was resolved that the lynx should go round to the other side of the lake, turn into a deer, and show himself so as to attract the attention of the young bears. Meantime the mouse was to go into the bear's canoe and gnaw a deep cut in the handle of her paddle close to the blade. The others were all to conceal themselves near the bear's tipi. The scheme proved successful. When one of the little bears saw the supposed buck across the lake he cried out, "Mother, mother, look at the deer on the opposite shore." The old bear immediately jumped into her canoe, and paddled towards it. The deer walked leisurely along the beach pretending not to see the canoe, so as to tempt the bear to paddle up close to him. Then all at once he doubled about and ran the opposite way. The bear hastened to turn her canoe by a few powerful strokes, throwing her whole weight on the paddle, which broke suddenly where the mouse had gnawed it; and the bear, falling at the same time on the side of the canoe, upset herself into the water. The other animals were watching the hunt from the opposite side, and as soon as they saw the bear floundering in the water, they ran into the tipi, pulled down the bag containing the heat, and tugged it, one at a time, through the air towards the opening to the lower world from which they had come. They hastened along as fast as they could, but the bag was very large, and none of them were able to keep up the pace very long; but whenever one became tired out, another would take the bag, and so they all hurried along at a rapid rate, for they knew that the bear would soon get ashore and return to her tipi, and that when she discovered her loss she would make haste to follow them. Sure enough, she was soon in hot pursuit, and had almost overtaken them before they reached the opening to the underworld. By this time the stronger animals were all exhausted, and now the mari took the bag and pulled it along a good way, and finally the pike caught it up and managed to get it through the hole just as the bear was upon the party. But every one of them passed safely through at the same time, and the moment the bag was within the underworld all the animals seized upon it and tore it open. The heat rushed out and spread at once to all parts of the world and quickly thawed the vast

accumulation of ice and snow. Its rapid melting flooded the earth, and the water rose till it threatened to drown all the animals which had survived the long winter. Many of them saved their lives by climbing up a particularly big tree which was much taller than any of the others in the woods. There was also a high mountain which others reached and were saved. The poor beasts now cried loudly for some one to remove the water, and a great creature, something like a fish, appeared and drank it until he became as large as a mountain. So the dry land returned, and as summer had come again, the trees and bushes and flowers which had been covered by the ice leaved out once more, and from that time till now the world has always been just as we see it at the present day.

II. THE GUARDIAN OF THE COPPER MINE.

Many years ago, a woman of the Yellow (or Red) Knife tribe got separated from her people and was left at the edge of the woods, from which the open lands stretch away to the north. She was found by a party of Inuits, who took her with them to the salt sea on the other side of the open country.¹ Having reached the sea, they took her across it in a boat made of skins, to a country still farther away.

She was in that country for several winters, but became very tired of it, and longed to see her own people once more. One day in spring she was sitting on the shore looking south across the water and crying for her people. A friendly wolf came towards her, wagging its tail. "My poor woman," said the wolf, "why do you cry?" At the same time he licked the tears from her cheeks. She told him she wished to cross the sea, so that she might try to walk to her own tribe. "I can help you to do that," said the wolf. "But," the woman answered, "you have no boat." "Never mind, follow me," was the reply. She followed him along the shore for some distance, and then he commenced to wade out into the water. He knew the shallow places for crossing the sea. The woman found the water not too deep. In some parts it was not much above her ankles. She got safely to the south side, and the wolf returned by the way they had come. She then started to walk over the open country. After travelling thus all alone for two moons she came to a river and sat down upon its bank. Among the stones at her feet she saw some pieces of red metal. She selected a thin one and made it into a bracelet, which she polished till it looked very beautiful, and then

¹ The Indians of the far north imagine that the whole sea consists of the long channel formed by Dolphin and Union Straits, Coronation Gulf, Dease Strait, etc., and they speak of the north and the south side of the sea as they would of the opposite shores of a large lake.

put it upon her arm. She then continued her journey toward the south. For several days after leaving the place where she found the red metal she set up a stone for a mark here and there on the tops of the hills, so that if she ever came that way again she might be guided to the exact spot by these private marks.

She walked for many days more towards the south, and then saw some tipis which looked like those of her own people. Approaching them cautiously, so as not to be seen, she satisfied herself that the people living in the tipis belonged to her own tribe. She then entered one of the lodges, tired and hungry, and was well received. The occupants gave her food, and she then lay down and slept. When she awoke she found the women of the tipi examining the shining bracelet on her arm. They asked her where she had got it, and were told that she had made it herself from a piece of red metal picked up a long way off, but she said she would go with them to the place in the spring. When the winter had passed, a number of the men of the band proposed to go to the red metal mine, and when they started she accompanied them as guide. They travelled back in the direction in which she had come, and as they approached the place she recognized the private marks she had set up, but said nothing about them to the men.

They camped at the spot and gathered a number of pieces of the metal to take back with them, but before starting on the return journey they insulted her and treated her so badly that she refused to go back with them, but resolved to stay always at the mine in order to guard it. So she sat down upon it, and the men went away.

About ten years afterwards a second party of men came to the spot and found that about half of her body had sunk into the ground. Another ten years had passed before the Indians again visited the place. Only her head then remained above the surface. It was thirty or forty years after the first visit when the last party went there, and she had then sunk entirely out of sight, pressing the mine down beneath her. Since that time many have searched for the treasure, but none have found it, because it is buried.

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